Security Multilateralism in Northeast Asia: A Lost Game or the Only Way to Stability?

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Abstract: Intensified great power rivalry between China and the U.S., ongoing regional power transition and militarisation following the "Rise of China", continued historical mistrust and territorial disputes, heightened security competition between China and Japan, and the still unsolved security conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait – these are all reasons for a rather pessimistic view of whether a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism is ever possible. Developments in the security situation in Northeast Asia in recent years have however also underlined the need for – and the common strategic interest in – a regional multilateral security mechanism. Arguing that in order to promote long-term stability in Northeast Asia, it is expedient to work towards developing a regional multilateral security mechanism, this article explores the future prospects focusing on the most difficult questions confronting the regional states. Especially highlighted are questions of whether to focus firstly on reaching a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, whether to include North Korea in Northeast Asian security multilateralism from the beginning, the role of the U.S. and U.S. bilateral alliances in Northeast Asian security multilateralism, who to lead security multilateralism in Northeast Asia, and the implications of broader East Asian political and security multilateralism for security multilateralism in Northeast Asia. The article concludes that while there remain serious and difficult obstacles and challenges, there are also positive trends, which the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism could further build on. These include a higher level of diplomatic interaction between regional states, an increased spread of a narrow form of problem-specific security multilateralism in the region as well as a strengthening of a broader East Asian political and security multilateralism that includes most of the Northeast Asian states.

Introduction

The security situation in Northeast Asia in recent years has been characterised by increased tension among the Northeast Asian states with several crises developing, especially related to the territorial dispute in the East China Sea between China and Japan and to developments on and around the Korean Peninsula. It seems that Northeast Asian security especially following the "Rise of China" has moved into an unstable period, and the regional states are to face many difficult security challenges in the coming years. Consequently, the debate in the region about the value and the future development of multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia has intensified.[1] The Six Party Talks set up by Beijing in 2003 following the second

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North Korean nuclear crisis remain the only multilateral effort in Northeast Asia to manage a regional security issue. Despite not having produced tangible solutions to the North Korean nuclear crisis and the fact that the talks have now been on hold for several years, no serious alternatives to the Six Party Talks have so far been presented, and the regional states seem hesitated to totally abandon the talks. Why is this? It in many ways reflects the ambiguities and high stakes involved. On the one hand, there is growing acknowledgement among the regional states of the benefits of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia to deal with the increasingly difficult security situation. On the other hand, however, the general high degree of historical mistrust as well as uncertainty and distrust about long-term intentions among the regional states seem to prevent any strong commitment and progress in relation to regional multilateral security cooperation.

Taking a step back from current developments on specific security conflicts in Northeast Asia, this article explores the future prospects for developing a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism focusing on the most difficult questions confronting the regional states. Despite the "all odds against" atmosphere, especially following developments in recent months on the territorial disputes between China and Japan in the East China Sea and between Japan and South Korea in the Sea of Japan/the East Sea as well as on the Korean Peninsula following the North Korean nuclear test in February 2013, this is a crucial exercise as work towards developing a regional multilateral security mechanism is vital in order to promote long-term stability in Northeast Asia.

The first section briefly discusses firstly how to analytically define and approach Northeast Asia and secondly what security multilateralism is and why it is desirable. The second section examines theoretical arguments on regional security multilateralism in order to point to the important factors and requirements. This is followed in the third section by an overview of the situation in Northeast Asia and broader East Asia regarding developments in the direction of multilateral security cooperation. In the fourth section the theoretically derived important factors and requirements are examined in relation to Northeast Asia and main obstacles and challenges for the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism are identified and discussed. In the fifth and main section the future prospects for security multilateralism in Northeast Asia are considered, focusing on the difficult questions confronting the regional states.

Northeast Asia and Security Multilateralism

Exploring Northeast Asian security multilateralism has to be based on a regional approach. It could be argued that Northeast Asia consisting of the two Koreas, Japan, China (Taiwan), Russia and the U.S. is not a region in itself, but rather a sub-region in the broader Asian region or Asian security complex that includes Northeast, Southeast, South and Central Asia, and therefore it is difficult to isolate developments in the security pattern and security dynamics in Northeast Asia from developments in the broader Asian security pattern and security dynamics.[2] While there are links and dependencies between the sub-regional security patterns and security dynamics in Asia, there is in Northeast Asia a relatively autonomous sub-regional security pattern consisting of the bilateral security relations between the Northeast Asian states generated primarily internally in Northeast Asia by a combination of material, geographical, historical and political factors (Yahuda, 2004: 10-11, 233-239; Kim, 2004). Northeast Asian security dynamics therefore have a substantial degree of "own security dynamics" and hence autonomy from the security dynamics set by developments in the broader Asian security pattern as well as in the global security pattern, and Northeast Asian states are more intensively focused on the security interactions and security issues that occur between them (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 93-100, 164-165, 172-182). Consequently, an analytical approach to Northeast Asia as a relatively autonomous security complex is both feasible and beneficial.

The U.S. is not geographically a Northeast Asian state. However, due to the long historical involvement of the U.S. as well as the continued strong American military presence and alliance system in Northeast Asia, the U.S. is embedded in the Northeast Asian security pattern and security dynamics.[3] Because the U.S. is not geographically located in the region, the U.S. however faces other opportunities and constraints. For example, the U.S. can in principle withdraw and the U.S. also follows global security objectives in the different regions. It is important to be aware of the different opportunities and constraints that the U.S. faces compared to a state geographically "locked" in Northeast Asia as well as the global security objectives that the U.S. also follows in the different regions. Nevertheless, it is analytically necessary to include the U.S. as a security actor in the Northeast Asian security complex when discussing the development of Northeast Asian security multilateralism. This follows also from the understanding of a regional security complex in both geographical and functional terms, i.e. in terms of the patterned security interactions among the involved states.

This is an important argument as it implies that in the assessments made by for example Chinese leaders of developments in Northeast Asian security conflicts, where the U.S. is involved, it is their assessments of the potential implications for China's security situation and position vis-à-vis the U.S. in Northeast Asia that have priority.

In the field of International Relations theory, multilateralism is often defined as "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions" (Keohane, 1990: 731). The focus is on states' involvement and participation in regional and global cooperation and institutions. In its most simple form, security multilateralism hence refers to interaction regarding security issues or developments among more than two states. It can take a variety of institutional forms differing in its level of institutionalisation from ad hoc and loose to more permanent and formal (Evans, 2007: 104). The functions of multilateral security mechanisms are to provide diplomatic channels and information flows, encourage transparency and early notification of states' military or security-related activities, resolve misunderstandings, reduce uncertainty and prevent miscalculations over others' intentions, offer a mechanism for crisis management, promote peaceful resolutions of disputes and facilitate diplomatic exchanges needed to generate principles and visions for peace and stability (Ikenberry, 2001: 15). This is generally desirable, and specifically in a region such as Northeast Asia characterised by a general high degree of uncertainty and strategic distrust and going through a regional power transition, it is of critical importance to work towards developing a regional multilateral security mechanism.

Regional Security Multilateralism: Important Factors and Requirements

Pointing to important factors and requirements for developing regional multilateral security mechanisms, this section especially draws on neo-realism, state-level or second-image theories and institutional theories. In the following analysis of the future prospects for security multilateralism in Northeast Asia, neo-realist insights are taken as the starting point, but it is useful to supplement these in order to capture the influence of the domestic characteristics of the regional states as well as of the historical and institutional legacies in the region.

In order to explain variation in security institutionalisation in different regions, neo-realists point to the different regional structural conditions such as number of, relative capabilities and geo-strategic characteristics of regional states (Duffield, 2003: 251). Such regional structural conditions serve as important incentives for and impediments to regional

security institutionalisation. Furthermore, neo-realists generally view multilateral security institutions as an instrument of the strongest states (Mearsheimer, 1995). Requirements for the development of a regional multilateral security mechanism from a neo-realist perspective are therefore that the strongest regional states have interests in this and that the regional multilateral security mechanism reflects the regional balance of power hereby reinforcing the position of states (Grieco, 1993; Ikenberry, 2001: 11). This, however, brings in the question of leadership and how to set up the multilateral security cooperation in the first place. Several neo-realists argue that the strongest state – the hegemonic power – has to play an important role in taking the lead (Gilpin, 1981; Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003: 6-11). The existence of an effective hegemon defining the rules and norms for the interaction between the participating states can even compensate to some extent for the absence of common interests and the presence of significant tension among the participating states.

State-level or second-image theories open the black box of neo-realism. A main argument in this literature is that there needs to be certain common domestic characteristics among the regional states in order to develop regional multilateral security mechanisms. State-level or second-image theorists hence argue that domestic characteristics are highly important for whether or not the security preferences and the security strategies of the regional states are compatible and, just as important, whether or not the regional states perceive them as being so. Domestic characteristics of the states in the region and their perceptions of one another and of developments in regional security are thus the important factors to look at. Such factors largely shape the possibilities for regional multilateral security cooperation, and differences in the patterns of such domestic characteristics are also important in explaining variation in multilateral security cooperation and security institutionalisation in different regions (Katzenstein, 1996). There is, however, no consensus in this literature on precisely which domestic characteristics – political system, level of development, national identity, political culture, ideology etc. – are most influential.

Applying an institutional perspective further contributes when seeking to point to important factors and requirements for Northeast Asian security multilateralism. The principal conceptual contribution of the institutional perspective in this context is that of path dependence (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Grieco, 1999). The argument here is that the character of regional security institutions established – or not – at one point in time has restricted the range of institutional possibilities at later junctures.

Together these theoretically-derived factors and requirements provide a useful analytical point of departure for exploring the future prospects for developing a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia that goes beyond the Six Party Talks framework.

What is Already There? Security Multilateralism in Northeast Asia and East Asia

Economic integration has grown tremendously in recent decades in Northeast Asia and more broadly in East Asia, but multilateral security cooperation has remained largely stagnant. One often hears the argument that Northeast Asia is simply not suited or ready for a regional multilateral security mechanism, and the security institutionalisation of Northeast Asia has been widely regarded as impossible (Timmerman, 2008: 5). In his survey of the last two decades of multilateral security proposals and activities in Northeast Asia, Rozman (2004) concludes that they have all failed, and he further argues that in the regional reality of competing nationalisms, unresolved territorial disputes, historical ghosts and intractable security problems, even modest security multilateral aspirations seem naïve. There is strong ground for this pessimistic view of whether a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism is ever possible. It should however not be completely written off. Actually, the increased security tension in Northeast Asia in recent years, specifically in recent months, has only further underlined the need for – and the common strategic interests in – a regional multilateral security mechanism. Furthermore, there have in recent years also been developments in Northeast Asia as well as in relation to broader East Asian political and security multilateralism supporting a less pessimistic view.

Even though there generally is a lack of multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia, there are some developments in this direction. The Six Party Talks set up by Beijing in 2003 to deal with the second North Korean nuclear crisis is the first – and so far the only – multilateral institutional effort in Northeast Asia to manage a regional security issue. The talks are hosted by China and include the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia and the U.S. The logic behind the Six Party Talks is bringing together the key regional states that have stakes in Korean Peninsula issues and have the resources to establish an agreement on the North Korean nuclear crisis and also to ensure coordination, implementation and monitor mechanisms when the agreement is hopefully eventually established. The Six Party Talks framework therefore builds on a shared acknowledgement in the region that a multilateral institutional framework is necessary in order to manage, and hopefully eventually solve, the

North Korean nuclear crisis. The Six Party Talks have had its ups and downs, where arguably a milestone in the process was reached in 2005 with the September 19 Joint Statement presenting a set of principles to form a basis for common action in the sphere of regional politics and security, essentially identifying the objectives as denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, normalisation of diplomatic relations among all regional states, economic development on the Korean Peninsula and the pursuit of a permanent peace regime as the basis for future cooperation.[4] As indicated above, the Six Party Talks have come to represent the most ambitious attempt to create a multilateral institutional framework to address a regional security issue on an explicitly Northeast Asian basis, and several scholars and diplomats in the region have expressed hope that the Six Party Talks could carry over into some sort of multilateral security mechanism to deal with regional security issues beyond the North Korean nuclear crisis.[5] This regional multilateral security mechanism hope was somewhat institutionalised in 2007 in the form of a working group within the Six Party Talks process lead by Russia.[6] This "Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism" working group is to promote regional security dialogue and cooperation beyond the settlement of the North Korean nuclear crisis and is thus envisioned to outlast the Six Party Talks. This further indicates how the regional states have all officially accepted in principle the vision of a permanent regional multilateral security mechanism, although ideas and interests clearly differ on how such a mechanism should work in practice (Snyder, 2008: 4; Koga, 2011: 15).

A main reason why optimistic views have developed in the region on the Six Party Talks gradually evolving into a regional multilateral security mechanism therefore builds on the way the Six Party Talks have developed from focusing narrowly on North Korea's nuclear program to embedding this crisis in a broader regional security framework acknowledging that the North Korean nuclear crisis cannot be solved in isolation, but progress in other regional security conflicts is also necessary and that such progress requires the cooperation of all regional states. Following this, the Six Party Talks have gradually become a focal point of Northeast Asian discussions about regional stability and multilateral security cooperation. However, an establishment of a multilateral security mechanism or institutionalised security cooperation in Northeast Asia built on the Six Party Talks framework still faces many obstacles and has also seen setbacks in recent years. Actually there have been no sessions in the Six Party Talks since December 2008 and the talks as such have been on hold for several years with disagreements among the involved states on the necessary requirements and

conditions for resuming the talks. The first priority of the U.S. and Japan is still denuclearisation, which is somewhat in contrast to the first priority of China and also South Korea being stability on the Korean Peninsula and support to the small signs of economic reforms that have been seen in North Korea especially following the new leader Kim Jong-Un. What is remarkable, however, is that despite their slow pace and serious setbacks and the calls, especially among U.S. diplomats, for an alternative forum to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis, it seems highly unlikely that such an alternative to the Six Party Talks will develop.[7] The Six Party Talks have hence proved surprisingly resilient and none of the regional states appear willing to abandon them altogether.

Another noteworthy development regarding regional security cooperation in Northeast Asia is the trilateral dialogue between China, Japan and South Korea, which has been in place since 2008. The trilateral dialogue so far has been more in the form of a ”plus three” summit held annually between the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea (Yahuda, 2011: 109). However, the trilateral China-Japan-South Korea dialogue could develop to play a significant role for regional security and maybe even play an important role in building a foundation and an agenda for developing a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia.[8] In support of such a vision, it is worth noticing that the three states have agreed at their meeting in May 2010 to set up a permanent secretariat for closer trilateral security cooperation and have embraced a broad set of issues such as human security, North Korea and border transparency issues.[9] China’s relations with especially Japan, but also South Korea, have however been significantly strained recently following the heightened security competition and tension between China and Japan, especially related to the territorial dispute in the East China Sea, and China’s perceived weak and ambivalent responses to the Cheonan and Yongpyong incidents in 2010.

Furthermore, relations between Japan and South Korea have also deteriorated recently especially following the visit in August 2012 by the then South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak to the Seoul-controlled island in the Sea of Japan/the East Sea known as Dokdo in South Korea, but which Japan also claims and calls Takeshima. What the implications of these recent developments are for the trilateral dialogue between China, Japan and South Korea as well as for the trilateral security cooperation and coordination between Japan, South Korea and the U.S. still remain to be seen. However, especially in Beijing and Seoul, but also in Tokyo, there are voices and efforts emphasising that a way to try to manage the increased

tension between China, South Korea and Japan is to maintain and further strengthen the institutionalisation of the trilateral dialogue and cooperation among them, especially on lower working levels as it is often also pointed out how the trilateral dialogue and cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea work rather smoothly here. Furthermore, it is also important to notice how, even in the current very tense and difficult situation, the diplomatic channels between China, Japan and South Korea have been kept open and an active dialogue has continued with calls from all sides for close consultation specifically on maritime safety issues. An important motivating factor no doubt is that the economies of China, Japan and South Korea have become so intertwined and interdependent. China, Japan and South Korea have hence developed into being each other's most important trading partners (Yahuda, 2011: 108-109). Also there are serious negotiations among the three Northeast Asian states about the establishment of a trilateral free trade agreement (FTA).

In the broader East Asian context there is a stronger tendency to seek to deal in multilateral settings with difficult security issues or disputes. This in order to keep the East Asian states committed to pursuing their national security interests without risking regional stability. The Northeast Asian states, especially China, have been very cautious towards this tendency, but also Beijing has since the mid-1990s started to engage more and more with East Asian multilateralism.[10] ASEAN is often in the "driver's seat" and the most important developments in the broader East Asian political and security multilateralism in recent years relate to some of the ASEAN-based multilateral institutions or arrangements such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT) consisting of ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) consisting of the East Asian states and the U.S., Russia, India, the EU, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and lastly the East Asian Summit (EAS) conducted since 2005 and consisting of the East Asian states and among others the U.S.[11] These three multilateral institutions or arrangements are often criticised for being merely talking shops as they seldom take any decisions as such and have no strong rules or sanctions instead relying strongly on voluntary compliance for its recommendations. This is a fair critique.

However, the East Asian states are making stronger efforts to manage tension in the region, and these multilateral institutions or arrangements by institutionalising consultation and dialogue contribute to increased confidence, communication and transparency also among the Northeast Asian states. The strengthening of the broader East Asian political and security multilateralism in recent years has therefore also had positive effects in Northeast Asia.

Recently, however, ASEAN and the ASEAN-led political and security multilateralism in East Asia are facing more challenges, which mostly relate to the question of how to deal with the changing power structure in the region, in particular a stronger China. The territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where several of the ASEAN-states also have claims and thus face Chinese claims, have especially challenged the solidarity and cooperation within ASEAN.[12]

Great Power Rivalry, Power Transition, State-level Obstacles and Negative Institutional Path in Northeast Asia

As pointed out above, neo-realists argue that regional structural conditions can serve as important incentives for and impediments to developing a regional multilateral security mechanism. Such a mechanism furthermore has to serve the security interests of the strongest regional states and reflect the regional balance of power. In the state-level or second-image theories a main argument is that in order to develop a regional multilateral security mechanism there needs to be certain common domestic characteristics among the regional states. From an institutional perspective a significant factor is whether there is a positive path dependency. How is it then in Northeast Asia? Arguably, the regional structural conditions work against the development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia, and there are also serious state-level obstacles as well as no positive, but rather a negative, institutional path.

Several regional great powers interact in Northeast Asia and this together with the ongoing power transition, where especially the "Rise of China" is shifting the balance of power in the region, set up particularly strong structural obstacles to the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism. Following neo-realist logic is it increasingly difficult to set up a regional multilateral security mechanism the higher the number of regional great powers involved, especially because the regional great powers have different security interests that the multilateral security mechanism has to include and because of the higher degree of uncertainty and strategic distrust (Friedberg, 1993: 2000).[13] And with the ongoing power transition there is also no stable power balance in Northeast Asia on which to build the multilateral security mechanism. The on-going power transition further results in intensified regional security dilemma dynamics as well as raises new forms of anxieties among the Northeast Asian states. That is, if following neo-realist insights stressing that a requirement for the development of a regional multilateral security mechanism is that the

mechanism reflects regional great power interests and the regional balance of power, then it is particularly difficult in Northeast Asia. There is hence no enduring balance of power in Northeast Asia, and there are highly complicated relations between regional great powers. On top of this, the ongoing power transition also further complicated the leadership issue – who should and could lead and thus bear most of the initial costs and risks in setting up a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia? Northeast Asia has since the end of the Second World War seen a highly U.S.-centric regional security order arranged around the U.S. bilateral alliance system – the "hub-and-spoke-system", wherein the U.S. as a hub established bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea among other states in Asia, backed by forward-stationed and forward-deployed American military forces. This is still the case, but to a lower degree, and this also has implications for the traditional leadership role of the U.S. in regional security.[14] As will be discussed further in the next section, the issue of who should and could lead the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism is a particularly difficult question to answer. The geo-strategic conditions in the region also work against the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism. The geographical proximity in Northeast Asia is lower than for example in Europe, where strong regional multilateral security mechanisms have been established, and from this lower geographical proximity arguably follows less security interdependence (Duffield, 2003: 253, 259; Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003: 14). On top of this there are several unsolved territorial disputes, which also involve issues about access to oil, gas, water and fishing grounds (Timmermann, 2008: 6). Following neo-realist logic it is therefore highly expected that Northeast Asia has a lack of regional multilateral security mechanisms and instead is dominated by a high degree of tension as well as by security unilateralism and bilateralism.

The Northeast Asian states have very different political, economic and cultural systems and there is therefore a low degree of political, economic and cultural homogeneity in Northeast Asia, which also impedes the development of multilateral security mechanisms in the region. Beyond that, differences in levels of development also make it more difficult to find common ground on security issues. There also remain several unsolved historical issues among the regional states, most of these related to Japanese wartime atrocities and the enduring enmity towards Japan in the region, and these historical issues have increasingly become intermingled with the changing – and strengthening – role of domestic public opinion and also mixed up with the territorial disputes and growing nationalisms in several of the

regional states (Duffield, 2003: 254). Consequently, the different domestic characteristics of the regional states, unsolved historical issues between them and their often negative perceptions of each other represent enduring obstacles complicating even the mere task of initiating and maintaining dialogue on security issues and developments, not to mention the actual creation of a regional multilateral security mechanism (Duffield, 2003: 261). Also the actual and potential political and economical instability in some of the regional states generate uncertainty and distrust about their future intentions and security behaviour.

Historically, multilateralism was not a prominent organising principle for the U.S. security strategy in Asia as it was in Europe after the Second World War. In contrast to Europe, where the U.S. involvement especially due to the power-sharing arrangement between the U.S., the USSR, Britain and France and the prior existence of the Western Union, quickly got a multilateral character, a comparable security arrangement was not set up in Asia (Duffield, 2003: 257; Grieco, 1999: 336-337). The U.S. instead set up the above-mentioned "hub-and-spoke system", and this U.S.-led bilateral alliance system still dominates the region. There were thus no strong efforts to develop multilateral or collective security arrangements, especially in Northeast Asia.[15] Northeast Asia therefore has no positive multilateral institutional basis or multilateral institutional infrastructure to build on – the region rather has a negative path dependence or negative multilateral institutional legacies.

Following from the above examination of the theoretically-derived important factors and requirements, it is clear that efforts to develop a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia face many serious and difficult obstacles and challenges. Are there however ways to work against, or rather around, these obstacles or challenges? And in this process, what are the most difficult questions confronting the regional states?

Future Prospects for Developing a Multilateral Security Mechanism in Northeast Asia

Despite the serious and difficult obstacles and challenges, the development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia should not be completely written off. Judging from debates in the International Relations environments in several of the regional states, the on-going regional power transition following especially from the "Rise of China", but also from the "normalisation" of Japan and from the U.S. "pivot" or "rebalancing" strategy in East Asia, has rather created growing interests in re-examining the possibilities for developing a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia. Drawing on the preceding sections and

interviews conducted by the author with International Relations scholars in China, Japan and South Korea as well as with Japanese and American diplomats, such a re-examination is in focus here.[16] The starting argument is that in order to promote long-term stability in Northeast Asia, it is expedient to work towards developing a regional multilateral security mechanism. In the process the Northeast Asian states however confront a number of difficult questions.

Whether to focus firstly on reaching a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis?

When discussing the future prospects for developing a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia it often ends up in a debate about what has to come – or be solved – first and what the security issues to cooperate on are. Especially there is in the region a debate among scholars and diplomats about the need to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis first or move on with working on a regional multilateral security mechanism as part of the efforts to reach a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis. A key argument has been that it is necessary for the Six Party Talks to be successful in handling the North Korean nuclear crisis in order for the Six Party Talks to provide a departure point for a Northeast Asian regional security mechanism.[17] This has also been the policy of several of the participating states, in particular the U.S. Most often the reason put forward is that it will be difficult to focus on other security issues as long at the North Korean nuclear crisis is still looming. It is also argued though, especially by several South Korean scholars, that gradual progress in regional multilateral security cooperation could contribute to solving the North Korean nuclear crisis and that a more permanent security structure could develop in parallel with a resolution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, and furthermore that solving the North Korean nuclear crisis will require that several other disputes and security conflicts in the region are also solved.

The way that the Six Party Talks have developed addressing also other disputes and security conflicts in the region, e.g. the issue of normalisation of relations between North Korea and Japan and the U.S., indicates that gradually a common position has developed among the participating states that the North Korean nuclear crisis cannot be solved in isolation, but requires progress in other regional disputes and security conflicts, which further entails the cooperation of all regional states. Others argue however that handling the North Korean nuclear crisis is the only common security concern in the region and therefore a Northeast Asian regional security mechanism is more likely to become semi-permanent in the event that North Korea-related issues continue to be a preoccupation and a focal point for

regional security cooperation on a protracted basis or if issues of North Korean political stability and economic reconstruction are put on the agenda for regional multilateral security cooperation that extends beyond the nuclear issue.[18] The point is that if North Korea is no longer a regional security concern, then there are no other common security concerns keeping the regional states working together. The development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia thus depends on North Korea continuing to be a common security concern.

While it is highly unlikely that the security concern regarding North Korea and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula will be gone anytime soon, there is still a need to think about other security issues, where the regional states have common interests in coordinating and cooperating. Often mentioned are non-traditional security issues such as transnational crime, piracy, illegal immigration or disaster relief. The logic behind is that on such non-traditional security issues all Northeast Asian states should be interested in coordination and cooperation. Furthermore, it is often highlighted how there more generally and from a long-term perspective also should be common interests among all Northeast Asian states in establishing confidence and security building mechanisms (CSBM) in the region, which in time could include issues such as greater transparency in military modernisation, the observation of military exercises and the development of "incidents at sea" arrangements. CSBMs like these could play a critical role in mitigating the security dilemma dynamics in the region and function as a form of conflict-prevention mechanism also. Cooperation on energy security, including joint exploration and development of energy resources, is also often mentioned as having high potential for multilateral cooperation among Northeast Asian states, and there is already a working group established on this issue within the Six Party Talks framework.[19]

Following from the above, it hence seems feasible and desirable to try to focus on gradually building the foundation of a regional multilateral security mechanism on non-traditional security issues, where there are common interests among Northeast Asian states. However, the abiding presence of the more traditional and high-level security issues among regional states makes this functional approach difficult**.** The counter-argument therefore is that the regional states need to solve some of their bilateral disputes and security conflicts first, e.g. that Japan and China first need to settle the territorial dispute in the East China Sea.[20] On the other hand, it is also argued that these bilateral disputes and security conflicts are better settled as the development of a regional multilateral security mechanism moves

ahead as such development would gradually build more trust among regional states and stronger common interests.[21]

An important issue related to this debate also is whether there are enough strong common interests and willingness among regional states to regionalise security issues and bilateral disputes, e.g. deal with the Taiwan issue or take up the territorial disputes between China, Japan and South Korea on a regional scale. At the moment this does not seem realistic. What rather seems realistic, and what there seems to be a developing agreement about among regional scholars and diplomats, is a continued emphasis in the region on more issue-oriented security cooperation and ad hoc security arrangements – kind of a narrow form of problem-specific security multilateralism, where the focus is on functional cooperation rather than institutional development as is currently seen in relation to e.g. transnational crime and disaster relief.

All in all, the Six Party Talks framework is likely to continue to constitute the starting point for any effort to develop a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism, but the focus is not only on the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, this also means that a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism will continue to be pursued only in a way that is consistent with and conducive to progress in relation to the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Whether to include North Korea in Northeast Asian security multilateralism from the beginning?

As examined above, there is a debate in the region about whether deeper multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia is possible as long as the North Korean nuclear crisis exists. However, there is also an argument about simply trying to ignore North Korea and go ahead. This relates to the debate about whether or not to include North Korea – should and could North Korea participate in any development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia? There generally seems to be an agreement that in order to ensure long-term stability on the Korean Peninsula and more generally in Northeast Asia, it is necessary to include North Korea eventually, but whether North Korea has to be in there from the beginning is more debatable.

An often-mentioned argument for just going ahead without North Korea is that unlike the other regional states, which have embarked on economic reforms and are globally integrated, North Korea apparently continues to view Northeast Asian regionalism

exclusively through the prism of immediate security interests and geopolitics. That is, in the multilateral political and security forums, where North Korea participates, e.g. in ARF, North Korea is often seen to taken a defensive and narrow posture as well as hold on to a strong and often xenophobic nationalism, stick to traditional views on sovereignty and strongly resist any interference in domestic affairs arguing also that North Korea is targeted by the multilateral political and security processes.[22] Such North Korean behaviour and positions arguably make it difficult to move anywhere on developing a regional multilateral security mechanism with North Korea in there from the beginning. The inclusion of North Korea therefore needs not only a change in the North Korean behaviour and positions but also a genuine wish from North Korea to be included and participate, which arguably is not there now. A possibility mentioned in the debate is also to gradually develop some criteria for membership of a regional multilateral security mechanism and a set of joint principles, and if North Korea – as well as the other regional states – is willing to meet these criteria and commit to the set of joint principles, then North Korea should become a member and if not, then the other regional states should still seek to encourage North Korean participation and draw North Korea closer.

Thus, it would be an open process, where all regional states know what is required to be a member of the regional multilateral security mechanism. Furthermore it is highlighted that if the Six Party Talks eventually succeed in producing some kind of package solution regarding the North Korean nuclear crisis, then North Korea would also necessarily become enmeshed in a variety of new diplomatic and technical arrangements, which could further help building up the administrative and technical capacity of North Korea.

As indicated above, it is likely that North Korea's reconstruction and integration into the regional economic, political and security order will remain a focal point for regional multilateral cooperation in the economic, political and security sphere for some time to come, also going beyond the North Korean nuclear crisis. There seems to be some agreement in the region that the central objective of any regional multilateral security mechanism should be to integrate North Korea into the regional economic, political and security order.[23]

The role of the U.S. and U.S. bilateral alliances in Northeast Asian security multilateralism?

Another important question in the debate in the region is whether the development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia can develop at the same time as the U.S. strengthens its bilateral alliances with Japan and also South Korea as well as its role in

broader East Asian security, as has been the case in recent years. The U.S. has traditionally not seen any contradictions between the U.S. bilateral alliances and the establishment of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia (Snyder, 2008: 6). However, the question is if other regional states, especially China, share this view. Arguably it could be possible to have a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia as a supplement to both the U.S. bilateral alliance structure and the evolving broader East Asian multilateral political and security arrangements centred on APT, ARF and EAS, but only if the U.S. bilateral alliances could alleviate the concerns of third parties, e.g. China. This no doubt would require a lot of diplomatic work and creativity in designing what Koga (2011: 15-17) has termed "a new regional security nexus" that allows U.S. regional allies to have more diplomatic autonomy in nurturing and building an open regional community while strengthening security ties with the U.S.

The main issue here is if U.S. bilateral alliances can exist without being directed against other regional states, but instead seek to involve or engage other regional states whereby bilateral and multilateral security arrangements work for the same aim – enhanced multilateral security dialogue and cooperation in Northeast Asia. Then there could be a possible coexistence of U.S. bilateral alliances and a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia, but again this seems difficult especially seen in the context of developments in recent years in Sino-U.S. security relations with an increasing degree of strategic distrust (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012). In China, among Chinese International Relations scholars, the prevailing analysis of the U.S. "pivot" or "rebalancing" strategy in East Asia is that the U.S. is increasingly trying to encircle and contain China by strengthening its bilateral alliances and security relations with East Asian states and generally by strengthening the American military presence in the region.[24] Furthermore, the increased security tension in Northeast Asia in recent years has apparently reinforced the traditional priority of – and the traditional security rationale behind – the alliance with the U.S. in both Japan and South Korea.

Who to lead security multilateralism in Northeast Asia?

Then there is also the issue about leadership, where neo-realist insights point to the need for a hegemon or a leader in developing regional multilateral security mechanisms. With the higher degree of great power rivalry between the U.S. and China in recent years and the ongoing power transition in the region it seems particularly difficult both to identify a leader and to

reach broad regional consensus and support for a leader. The U.S. as the strongest economic and military power as well as the traditional security guarantor in the region would be the first leader candidate (Cossa, 2009). The Obama-administration also seems committed to a stronger multilateralism and has generally moved away from the more skeptical view of the previous Bush-administration on multilateralism. However, it still remains questionable whether the Obama-administration has the credibility, vision and will to be a driving force behind the development of a Northeast Asian security mechanism. More specifically, the Obama-administration has on the one hand continuously indicated willingness to engage more strongly with existing multilateral security mechanisms in Asia and to keep the commitment to a multilateral framework and a comprehensive package in relation to the North Korean nuclear crisis. On the other hand, however, the Obama-administration has, as discussed above, also strengthened its bilateral alliances in East Asia presenting these as the core of the U.S. security strategy in the region and has also focused on promoting and building new strategic partnerships and security relations with regional states in the broader East Asian region as part of the U.S. ”pivot” or ”rebalancing” strategy launched in 2011.[25] This increases uncertainty in Northeast Asia regarding U.S. long-term intentions and hinders U.S. leadership, where especially a stronger China as well as North Korea likely will resist participation in a U.S.-led regional multilateral security mechanism. It is equally, if not more difficult, to envision Japan leading any multilateral security process in the region, especially because of Japan's unsolved historical and territorial disputes with several of the other regional states as well as because of domestic, including constitutional, constraints and the strong Japanese priority of its security relations with the U.S. South Korea has been a strong advocate of a multilateral framework to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis and a range of other unsolved security problems in the region (Evans, 2007: 107). But whereas South Korea might facilitate such a framework, it is doubtful whether South Korea has the resources or the domestic consensus to take the lead in developing a regional multilateral security mechanism, also because the North Korean issue is still the “filter” through which South Korea sees and approaches all other developments in regional security. Lastly it is also very difficult to see China take the lead. On the one hand China would still be too insecure and not comfortable with security multilateralism. And on the other hand, especially the U.S. and Japan would still hold too high a level of distrust regarding China's long-term intentions. A growing concern not only in the U.S. and Japan, but more generally in Asia, is how to engage a “rising” China

and promote what the U.S. has termed ”responsible” Chinese great power security behaviour, and this concern has only grown further after what is perceived as an increasingly assertive, and even aggressive, Chinese security behaviour in the region in recent years (Yahuda, 2011: 107; Swaine, 2010). Besides, it is difficult to know what kind of multilateralism Beijing would have in mind for the region – would it for example include the U.S.? It remains unclear whether Beijing has any clear idea about whether a multilateral security forum with the U.S. included is the preferred setting for taking up and solving regional security issues.[26]

The implications of broader East Asian political and security multilateralism for security multilateralism in Northeast Asia?

It is therefore difficult to point to a leader to push for the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism. This supports a stronger focus in the region on broader East Asian multilateral political and security initiatives and arrangements as also pushing for such developments in Northeast Asia. The reasoning behind is that all the Northeast Asian states participate in ARF and, except North Korea, also in EAS, and generally it seems that for example the discussion of CSBMs works better in ARF settings than in any specifically Northeast Asian setting.[27] Therefore, the argument goes, it could be that taking the difficult security issues between Northeast Asian states “out” of Northeast Asia and into a broader regional forum with more states who could act as mediators involved, , could help decrease both security dilemma pressures and mutual distrust as well as the domestic constraints on the Northeast Asian states. Progress in the broader East Asian multilateral political and security initiatives and arrangements therefore could also help to increase confidence among the Northeast Asian states and gradually strengthen the basis for a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism.

Furthermore, it is highlighted how this could also be facilitated with more concrete initiatives such as for example expanding and specifying the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which emphasizes the peaceful resolution of international disputes and non-interference principles, to Northeast Asia. China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, North Korea and recently in 2009 also the U.S. have acceded to the ASEAN TAC. Subsequently, the overall idea is that the development of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism could adopt a “nesting” within broader East Asian political and security multilateralism, where there has been a positive trend in recent years with deeper multilateral political and security cooperation, and such a positive trend would then also have a positive influence on

multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Further, such ”nesting” within broader East Asian political and security multilateralism arguably would also more generally support a development seen in Northeast Asia in recent years, where diplomatic interaction between Northeast Asian states has reached a higher level on a bilateral and trilateral basis and in the context of broader East Asian multilateral political and security processes. This is for example in the form of regular senior-level strategic and economic dialogues and military-to-military relationships as well as in the form of the expanding and gradually institutionalising trilateral dialogue between Japan, South Korea and China. Also highlighted as positive in this regard is the growing layer of non-governmental processes and networks on security issues involving research institutes, universities and civic associations that now work across Northeast Asia.[28]

Security Multilateralism in Northeast Asia is Impossible, but Inevitable

There are many difficult questions to be answered and difficult choices to be made on the way to developing a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia. In particular following the increasingly tense security situation in the region recently with serious crises developing among the Northeast Asian states, it looks very difficult. However, there also seems to be a growing need for – and a growing acknowledgement of common strategic interests in – developing a regional multilateral security mechanism among Northeast Asian states. That is, despite the fact that ideas and interests clearly differ on how a regional multilateral security mechanism should look and how it should work in practice, there nevertheless appears to be a growing shared vision among Northeast Asian states of such a mechanism. With intensified great power rivalry between China and the U.S., ongoing regional power transition and militarisation following the “Rise of China”, continued historical mistrust and territorial disputes, lack of common economic, political and cultural bases and a negative institutional path, all odds are against it. There are however also positive trends. These include a higher level of diplomatic interaction between regional states, an increased spread of a narrow form of problem-specific security multilateralism in the region as well as a strengthening of a broader East Asian political and security multilateralism that includes most of the Northeast Asian states. The development of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia could further build on these positive trends. It will be a long process, but it seems, as also noted by Evans (2007: 107), that “multilateralism in Northeast Asia is impossible, but inevitable”.

Notes

[1] This article draws on interviews with Chinese International Relations scholars, Japanese International Relations scholars and diplomats, South Korean International Relations scholars and American diplomats conducted in Beijing (School of International Studies at Peking University, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations), Tokyo (National Institute for Defence Studies, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. Embassy) and Seoul (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security) in November and December 2010 and again in Beijing (School of International Studies at Peking University) in May and September 2012.

[2] For the theory on regional security complexes see Buzan (1991), who defines a regional security complex as a group of states geographically close and with strong security interdependence between them, and his main argument is that security is a relational phenomenon, not merely a result of the distribution of relative capabilities among states, and as threats operate better over shorter distances, the security interactions with one's closer neighbours often have top priority and are more intense.

[3] Cf. also e.g. Timmermann (2008: 1-18) and Kim (2004: 12), who specifically argue that any strictly "geographical" approach would hide rather than reveal the critical role of the U.S. in Northeast Asian security. It is also worth noting that China recognizes the U.S. presence in regional security by referring to the U.S. as an "Asian-Pacific" power, which is also the reference used by the U.S. itself.

[4] The Six Party Talks have despite several interruptions produced three joint statements since 2003, and all of these reflect consensus among the Northeast Asian states on the establishment of certain principles and concrete action for disabling North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

[5] Cf. note 1 above. See also Koga (2011: 6).

[6] In 2007 with the February 13 Joint Statement five working groups were established within the Six Party Talks process to deal with specific disputes and security issues. One of these is a working group on the development of a "Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism".

[7] Cf. also Haggard and Noland (2009: 129).

[8] This ambition and generally a stronger emphasis on trilateral dialogue and cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea is especially expressed by South Korean International Relations scholars – author's own interviews with South Korean International Relations scholars conducted in Seoul (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security) in December 2010. See also Snyder (2008: 6) and Koga (2011: 14).

[9] See also Valencia (2010).

[10] The Chinese security strategy, especially since the mid-1990s, with its emphasis on reassurance of East Asian states about "the peaceful rise" of China and its promotion of a

long-term process towards multipolarity fits well with the overall focus of ASEAN on balancing great powers in the region by leading and promoting regional multilateral cooperation and integration. Furthermore, the ASEAN-states have played an active role in promoting China's accession into the ASEAN-led multilateral political and security arrangements in East Asia as a way to try to constrain a stronger China and gradually establish mutual trust.

[11] The U.S. joined the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2011 and indicating the high U.S. commitment and priority given to East Asia and specifically the EAS, American President Obama participated in the EAS in 2011 and again in 2012.

[12] At the ASEAN summit in 2012, the ASEAN-states for the first time in ASEAN's 45 years history did not manage to reach a joint statement especially due to disagreements on how to handle the South China Sea disputes.

[13] This follows also from Waltz' (1979: 161-193) argument that multipolarity is the most unstable and conflict-prone polarity especially due to the high potential for misunderstandings, miscalculations and shifting alliances.

[14] The argument is not that the U.S. is in strong decline and the U.S. bilateral alliances are breaking up. However, the security situation in Northeast Asia and more broadly in Asia is undergoing restructuring and this also challenges the traditional U.S. leadership role and U.S. bilateral alliances.

[15] Arguably the U.S. security guarantees to both Japan and some of the other Asian states just after the end of the Second World War also made it less necessary for Japan and those other Asian states to reconcile and develop their own security cooperation.

[16] Cf. note 1 above for the details on interviews.

[17] Cf. also e.g. Haggard and Noland (2009: 119, 125).

[18] Cf. also e.g. Snyder (2008: 5).

[19] Cf. also e.g. Haggard and Noland (2009: 131).

[20] Cf. also e.g. Timmerman (2008: 8).

[21] Cf. Valencia (2010) for a rather specific suggestion on how to do this in relation to maritime territorial conflicts in Northeast Asia, where he argues for the establishment of a maritime code of conduct.

[22] Cf. also Evans (2007: 109).

[23] A process of de facto economic integration is - despite the caution of the North Korean regime - already occurring, dominated by North Korea's bilateral relations with especially China, but also South Korea (Haggard and Noland, 2009: 124).

[24] Cf. also Swaine (2012).

[25] As part of the U.S. ”pivot” or “rebalancing” strategy, Washington has in recent years strengthened its alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines as well as its security dialogue and cooperation with Singapore, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Vietnam. For further on the U.S. “re-engagement” with East Asia, see also Koga (2011: 9-10).

[26] See also Zhu (2010: 52-53).

[27] Cf. also Evans (2007: 111).

[28] There are thus several non-governmental Track II security forums in Northeast Asia, most prominently the CSCAP (Committee on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific) and the NEACD (Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue).

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